

Skinner

## Finding Home

The wait in the rehab center was familiar. The confining stone walls and cracked tile floors, the crumbling ceiling and rattling radiator, all comforted me. The puzzle I completed of the United States had no Georgia or Texas, and I was uncertain where Kentucky, my home, belonged. Beyond the empty chairs and bare tables, and through the steel double doors, the sobriety prayer buzzed. The ground itself began to rumble as a stampede of yellow-eyed strangers burst through. Hoards of grey-skinned strangers staggered past until only one remained--my mother.

She stood motionless. I examined her pitiful figure across the room. She wore red shorts and a ragged v-neck sweater with holes in the collar. Moans echoed through her hollow bones as she breathed, and her scarred skin peeled like ash. I thought her knee would crack as she knelt to hug me.

I remained seated. I watched the zombie before me labor to rise. I saw her body sway and her black teeth clench. I listened as her moans became wheezes and then moans again as she stood. Her posture was arched and her gaze was downcast as she began to approach. I watched each step as she drew closer, the knots in her hair and her slender hands like my own.

I was four years old. The wooden floors creaked as I dashed to the bare pine in Granny's living room. Winter's bite whistled through the unsealed windows. The fogged glass fractured the sun's light throughout the room. Ornaments nearly burst as I let them drop beneath the tree. Granny and I had made an ornament with my picture and a fish hook. I hung it as high as I could reach. I ate most of the candy canes I was meant to hang. I threw handfuls of tinsel in the air and watched as the sparkling strands of silver and green descended.

I heard a knock at the door.

Granny rose from her recliner to greet an unfamiliar woman in a black suit. The woman gave me with a closed-mouth smile before she and Granny went to the kitchen. I waited on the recliner in the living room. The carols had ended and a white noise buzzed from the speakers. The sun had set by the time their talk had ended.

The woman left, and Granny came to the living room. She had all my things in her arms, a backpack with my clothes and a coat.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Granny pulled the coat around my back. Her hands trembled as she snapped each button.

"Where are we going, Granny?" I asked again.

She put the backpack on my shoulders, held my hand, and walked me out the door.

There was a black sedan parked in front of the house. As we walked,

Granny said, "Baby, you have to go with this woman. She's gonna take you somewhere real nice."

"Where?" I asked.

Granny lifted me into the car and buckled my seatbelt.

"Are we going to see mommy?" I asked.

Granny kissed my forehead. "Everything's gonna be okay, baby", she said. "Everything will be fine."

She closed the door, and as we drove away, I watched the only home I ever knew fade into the distance.

The room was dim. There were ten beds across two parallel walls where the children slept. I lay in the furthest corner to the right of a door that never closed. I heard a child weeping and the sweeping sound of plastic, material mattresses. Whispers echoed outside the open door in the dead air of the room. The thick smell of urine from the bathroom made it hard to breath. I wrapped the gray blanket around me and tried to stop shivering.

A silhouette appeared in the doorway.

"It's time for bed," the shadow said.

I lay my head on my pillow, closed my eyes, and dreamed of my mother: We were holding hands and strolling together along the downtown streets. There was not a cloud in the sky. The sun warmed our faces through the

walls of the high-rise buildings. Traffic was steady and quiet. Small trees lined the streets and burst with magnificent oranges and purples reflected by the light of the walkway. A light haze of morning dew beneath the trees made the air smell sweet and easy to breathe. The ruffling leaves harmonized with the melodies of birds.

In this dream, my mother was beautiful. She wore a knee length dress with a gold flower print that danced in the breeze beneath a pale green bolero. The oak tone of her skin was dazzling in the sunlight. Her hair was full and black and lay behind her ears to reveal two swaying gold hoops. Her lips were set in steep contrast to the pearl whites of her eyes. I felt a drop of rain as the storm approached and we began to run.

I was nudged awake by a stranger. She wore a white, button-up blouse and a knee length black skirt. Her silver and black hair was pulled tight in a French roll. There was powder on her face. She placed her palm on my head and leaned over and said, "It's time to meet your new mother."

Ms. Rhonda was a tall, grizzly woman. Her wooden cane drummed the floor with each step. Her hands were calloused, and she smelled of cheap wine and cigarettes. Her southern accent was as thick as cement and hard to understand. She demanded respect and proper etiquette. I was taught to say "Yes, ma'am" and stand up straight.

"Look me in the eye, boy," she would say. She taught me how to hold

a fork at the dinner table and to carry on polite conversation with strangers. She was my mother, and she took care of me.

I would wake up early some days in a bed soaked with urine. I would try to flip the mattress and put on dry clothes. I tried washing my body at the sink. I sprayed air freshener. I made my bed. But when the alarm sounded, she would rise and know what I had done.

Sometimes, I would run or lock myself in the bathroom. I would hide under the bed and close my eyes. I wanted to disappear and avoid what was coming, but she always found me. She would drag me by the arm to her bedroom. She had a wooden paddle she kept by the door. It was shaped like a spatula with three holes drilled in the end. The handle was spiraled by rope and a long leather strap that hung from the bottom.

My wrists were bound to the foot of her bed as she hammered my body. The holes stung on impact, and then she would rotate the paddle and whelp my legs with the leather straps. "This is for your own good," she said. "This is for your own good."

When she finished, she unbound my wrists. She placed the paddle in its place near the door, grabbed her cane, and left to make breakfast.

I would lay at the foot of the bed until the meal was ready.

I remember visiting my mother while I lived with Ms. Rhonda. She would sit across the table from me in the waiting area, her arms flailing as she called my name.

“What?” I asked.

She reached across the table and held my fists. “I said I'm trying.”

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

“How are things at home?”

“Things are good,” I said. “Things are fine.”

I lived with Ms. Rhonda until one day the social worker stopped by in her black sedan and took me to meet my next, new mother. Ms. Ava's silver hair lay flat against her hunched back. Her bones were brittle and her veins bulged through her thin skin. She spoke in a tone just louder than a whisper and slithered about her house in slippers. She stayed in her room most of the day but cooked dinner every night. She taught me how to set my alarm and get myself ready for school. It was here that I ran my first bath. It was here I learned that laundry keeps the smell of urine out of underwear. It was here I learned that being present is not the same as being available.

Within a month, I was riding in the back of the social worker's black sedan and heading for another new home with another new mother and another new form of care and concern. Each new home brought new lessons in how to wash my own sheets and feed myself, how to take a beating and how to survive. Through all the instability, there was one constant—the social

worker's black sedan and my new mother gone.

The social worker drove for nearly an hour before we pulled in the driveway of a yellow house. It was spring and a sycamore in full bloom hung over the left side of the home. The small, overgrown yard was bursting with violets and dandelions. A small, curved, walkway lead to three, half-painted steps. There was a rocking chair stationed to the right of a black screen door.

From the porch, I could see a liquor store and, down the alley, a barber shop. The social worker knocked on the screen. I turned my back to the door and watched two men in black clothes across the street. They were shaking hands like they already knew each other, the one seemingly grateful for something he'd been given. I watched them bow in mutual appreciation, their pace quickening as they stumbled off in different directions.

My newest new mother's neighborhood felt somehow familiar. I turned to face the door. I could not see my new mother's face, but she seemed familiar, too, her body slightly taller than mine but heavier. I stood up straight and licked my lips, preparing to speak when the screen opened. I had learned to be polite and expect the worst.

"Welcome home, baby," my Granny said as she opened the door. She

wrapped her arms around me.

I tried to answer her, but I couldn't speak for thinking about the night that social worker came and took me away. I remember dancing like a fool that night, throwing tinsel on the tree and thinking, if nothing else, my Granny loved me. I could remember a lot of things, the fishhook ornament we'd made, the creak of the hardwood floors, but mostly I remember the way my Granny's house looked out the window of that black sedan as we drove away.